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### Making it official

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**Making it official: Participation professionals and the challenge of institutionalizing  
deliberative democracy**

*Oliver Escobar*

## **Why research into *official* participation professionals?**

Public institutions in the United Kingdom (UK) are building capacity to engage “publics”, “communities”, “citizens”, “stakeholders” . . . . in policy and decision making, and co-production of public services (Barnes, Newman & Sullivan, 2007; Newman, 2012). A growing cadre of *official* public participation professionals (PPPs) are responsible for organizing public engagement processes. These official PPPs are distinct from their counterparts in the private and non-profit sectors. They have the status and working conditions of public servants, their operational context is public administration, and they must navigate the institutional politics of policymaking.

U.S. scholars have investigated the “role of agents in creating and facilitating opportunities for deliberative democracy” (Feldman, Khademian, Ingram & Schneider, 2006, p. 89), thus unpacking the world of civic engagement practitioners (e.g. Forester, 1999; Lee, 2015). However, much research focuses on professionals working on participatory experiments rather than everyday democratic processes. In turn, UK scholars have studied “community engagement professionals” (Mayo, Hoggett & Miller, 2007; Taylor, 1995), organizational “boundary spanners” (Williams, 2012), and “civic entrepreneurs” (Durose, 2011), as well as practitioners in science public engagement (Chilvers, 2008; Pieczka & Escobar, 2013). Internationally, research illustrates their “increasingly influential and powerful role in policy-making processes”, and “wider problems of instrumentalism and industrialization” related to the commercialization of participation by external consultants spearheading the “emergent deliberative industry” (Amelung, 2012, pp. 13-14; Cooper & Smith, 2012; Hendriks & Carson, 2008; Lee, 2015).

The chapter contributes to this literature by investigating the opaque world of *official* PPPs working permanently within public administration (rather than as external consultants),

operating across policy domains, and constrained and enabled by evolving institutional arrangements. The professionals studied here are distinct because they organize *official* participatory processes embedded in institutional policy contexts—in contrast to processes outside public administration organized by civil society organizations. The second contribution of this chapter is to offer an account that goes beyond the visible role that PPPs play as facilitators in public forums. If we think of participatory processes as spaces for performance, borrowing Goffman's (1971) theatrical metaphor, studies tend to focus on frontstage phenomena and disregard the backstage.

If PPPs are increasingly powerful, what does this actually entail? This chapter analyses their backstage political work, for they are “public stewards, not just apolitical neutrals. They are organizers of public debate and deliberation, not just convenors who serve water and ask everyone to be polite” (Forester, 1999, p. 168). I therefore follow Geertz's (1973, p. 5) advice: to understand participatory and deliberative democracy you “should look in the first instance not at its theories or . . . what its apologists say about it; you should look at what the practitioners of it do”. I thus examine their work as agents entangled in evolving policymaking cultures, and their struggles to embed engagement work in public administration. I am less concerned here with what participation *is* or *generates*, than with the changing professional practice that brings it into being.

### **Learning with PPPs: Methodological notes**

The research design entailed a multi-method approach because studying the complexity of practice requires a “toolkit logic” (Nicolini, 2009, p. 1403). My ethnographic toolkit included six data sources (Escobar, 2014). This chapter draws on three: participant observation, interviews and focus groups. Participant observation entailed two years of fieldwork

shadowing official PPPs, attending 117 meetings, and 15 weeks of work placements. The first year focused on frontstage work, exploring the terrain, and building relationships. Then, I negotiated placements, accessed new processes, and focused on both backstage and frontstage work.

I adopted the modality of participant observation known as “shadowing”, suitable to study agents across diverse settings (Czarniawska, 2008). The premise is to follow the agent to make sense of unfolding relationships: “how things hang together in a web of mutual influence or support or interdependence” (Becker, 1996, p. 56). I spent 817 hours<sup>1</sup> shadowing PPPs, distributed over 131 days, and generating 969 pages of transcribed fieldnotes.

I conducted semi-structured interviews to understand the web of actors around PPPs, explore meaning-making processes, and collect stories of practice (Forester, 1999). This resulted in 44 in-depth interviews using snowball sampling: PPPs (13), elected representatives (8), local government officials (12), National Health Service officials (4), and community activists and non-profit sector representatives (7). Finally, I conducted 3 focus groups to explore engagement work via group interaction and “joint construction of meaning” (Bryman, 2008, p. 474). The focus groups included 7 citizens, 5 PPPs from the National Health Service, and 4 PPPs shadowed during placements.

The PPPs I shadowed worked in local government, which in Scotland takes the form of 32 “Local Authority Areas” (LAAs), with an average of 162,000 people each. I sought to study the institutional world of official PPPs to develop a grounded theory of public participation work (see Escobar, 2014). Consequently, I selected one LAA reflective of national socio-demographic and institutional characteristics in Scotland, and with a team of PPPs willing to give me access. I named the LAA Wyndland to preserve anonymity. Anyhow, shadowing this team and their community of practice often took me to other LAAs.

Following nodal agents is a productive option to generate rich data in multi-sited ethnography. This qualifies the deceptive appearance of single-n cases, as they often entail “multiple observational areas within their geographic, organizational, or political settings; multiple interviews and chats; multiple events observed” (Yanow, 2009, p. 294). I have come to see Wyndland as a microcosm of Scottish participatory and deliberative democracy, and these official PPPs as exemplars of a broader community of practice that shares many of their trials and tribulations<sup>2</sup>. However, this research is not intended to be amenable to generalization in a conventional sense. The challenge in political ethnography is to “select small sites that open windows onto larger processes of political transformation” (Shore & Wright, 2011, p. 12). Therefore, I don’t present Wyndland as a local manifestation of a global phenomenon, but as one of many sites in which that phenomenon is constituted. The next research step is using this ethnographic groundwork to elaborate a survey of PPPs across the country<sup>3</sup>.

### **PPPs in institutional context: Community Planning Partnerships in Scotland**

Although “community workers” have been integral to the UK welfare state since the 1960s (Craig, Mayo, Popple, Shaw & Taylor, 2011), recent local governance developments (Stoker, 2004) have ushered a new generation of official public participation professionals. On the one hand, there has been a proliferation of “partnership” arrangements between local government, public agencies and non-profit organizations, which has extended “the range of institutional actors with responsibilities and powers for delivering public policy” (Barnes & Prior, 2009, p. 5). On the other hand, this has been accompanied by increased opportunities for public participation through “new spaces within which citizens and officials meet together to deliberate, make and review policy” (Barnes, 2009, p. 33; Barnes et al., 2007). Despite the

challenges of combining both partnership governance and public participation (Sullivan & Lowndes, 2004), variations of such arrangements remain central to the project of constructing “a new set of relationships between government, communities and citizens” in the UK (Barnes & Prior, 2009, p. 5). Official PPPs, working at the nodes of such relationships, are thus becoming more prominent as participatory processes multiply.

In Scotland, the pursuit of that double feat—governance via partnerships + public participation—started with the Local Government in Scotland Act 2003, and is called Community Planning (CP). Over the last 20 years, molded through a series of policy statements, developments and evaluations, CP has become integral to how successive governments have envisioned the future of local governance (Audit Scotland, 2013). There are 32 CP Partnerships, one per Local Authority Area. Each Partnership has a Board and various policy-themed strategic forums, which bring together representatives from the Council (statutorily tasked with leading and thus employer to PPPs), the National Health Service, non-profit sector, police, emergency services, business, education and community associations. At local level, there are also Neighborhood Partnerships or Local Area Forums for stakeholder deliberation and community participation. This is the institutional architecture that the PPPs I shadowed traverse, and research participants described them as “*the life and blood of Community Planning*”. Their jobs didn’t exist before CP, and CP did not exist before them—they brought each other into being.

The purpose of this chapter is to study what Dewey might have called Wyndland’s “practical ecology” of participation (Wagenaar & Cook, 2003, p. 167), thus providing an account of participatory policy-making as a “continuous process of contestation across a political space” (Wright & Reinhold, 2011, p. 86). Firstly, I will explore tensions elicited by PPPs’ work. Secondly, I will argue that those tensions are constitutive of a contested “*culture change*”

project front-lined by official PPPs. Thirdly, I will illustrate how they negotiate those tensions and how that affects them. Finally, I will offer reflections on the professionalization and institutionalization of public engagement work in Scottish local governance. In sum, the chapter analyzes the relational ecology of official PPPs; that is, the milieu of practices and networks that shapes, and is shaped by, their actions and interactions—thus offering insight into emerging professional practices within public administration.

### **Being wanted and unwanted: Collusions and conversions**

During fieldwork a PPP confided that she often felt “*unwanted*”. I used this as a heuristic and, inspired by Becker’s (1993) ethnographic way of unravelling a single word, I sought to learn about PPPs by investigating their “unwanted-ness”. Initially this was puzzling, since the team was constantly receiving demands to organize participatory processes. Indeed, their expertise seemed in good currency.

#### *Wanted*

Some officials appreciate the PPPs help to comply with mandatory public engagement, and value their expertise and networks. Many praised their ability to work across organizational boundaries—“*they are not siloed and see the bigger picture*”—and noted that they “*are getting well known in the communities*”. One explained: “*they are actually doers and enablers. . . . I am more of a policy person, not the kind of getting my hands dirty*”.

A second group seeking their assistance includes elected representatives trying to make participation work for their electoral agendas. As a senior official explained, PPPs “*can get*



*pulled in several directions and because they . . . are engaging lots and lots of people . . . many councillors want a slice of that”.*

Finally, there are citizens and community representatives who welcome them as mediators. A non-profit organization executive noted their increasing value since the financial crisis: “we have been challenged by the global economic situation . . . so the change from 2008 has also meant that we have to get around tables and have proper conversations that actually involve partnership”. Some citizens argued that official PPPs made “a huge difference” to their participation experience:

*They move you forward, look after the group and make sure that egos don’t get in the way. They also have a direct link to councillors and the Council . . . that can be very advantageous. . . . You can’t do away with the professionals . . . community groups can be problematic, there are factions, it can be very messy. And I am happy to give time, but I still want the support.*

The high demand made these PPPs feel “overwhelmed” and “stretched”, or “dragged into meaningless processes” (i.e. “traditional consultations”) instead of focusing on their preferred deliberative forums. Their institutional context favored quantity over quality. Therefore, somewhat paradoxically, as PPPs become popular, their interventions can become self-defeating.

### *Unwanted*

A PPP had previously worked as a welfare officer: “Everyone wanted you there, and here is so frustrating because you’re being attacked and belittled”. Research participants often mentioned widespread “hostility” against PPPs—Councillor Sullivan: “the really sad thing is

*the amount of people that come up against [them] for just doing their job, the abuse that they have had from certain quarters*” PPPs often spoke about “*resistance*” by officials who feel overburdened by participatory processes. A non-profit organizer explained: “*every other department within the Local Authority fights Community Planning, and does not believe in it. They do it because the [national] government has told them, [the PPP] does it because she believes in it*”. That commitment, however, elicits strong reactions and officials often complained about being “*nagged*”. Some felt uncomfortable with participatory processes that challenged their authority and expertise, and deployed a repertoire of micro-resistances (De Certeau, 1988)—i.e. not reporting, overlooking emails, missing deadlines, abandoning meetings, or ignoring forum requests.

Regarding elected representatives, some saw PPPs as tampering with their influence. A Cabinet member explained that some colleagues “*still find it difficult to accept that they are not the only show in town*”. An extreme case was a Cabinet member who was “*really abusive*”, and tried to prevent deliberative forums by admonishing official PPPs: “*I don't want any of this in my turf!*”. Opposition politicians were also often unsupportive, and sometimes accused PPPs of being political instruments of the current administration.

The team also felt unwanted by some non-profit sector and community representatives, who saw them as interloping in their community engagement and leadership. PPPs often described such community groups as “*defensive*”, “*unwilling to participate*” and “*protectionist*”. A community activist argued against citizen forums: “*you cannae give power when there is decision-making to people who, no disrespect, who are ignorants*”. Accordingly, some community groups saw them as “*invaders rather than supporters*”, and PPPs endured situations “*where these people could come and rip up your professional practice and you'd*

*basically just had to sit and take it” in order to “try and sort of negotiate or allay some fears with these groups”.*

In sum, PPPs are wanted because of their expertise on participation, and unwanted because not everyone likes how deliberative forums invite new participants and redefine established roles and relationships.

### *Making converts*

Despite challenges, some PPPs seemed optimistic: *“We are making converts”*. Over time, they could turn critics into allies—e.g. Health Forum citizen: *“I wondered if it was just lip-service to democratic participation, but more recently I am persuaded that it is a genuine effort to involve the public in the work of the Health Service”*. Conversions highlighted the possibilities of forums as transformative “contact zones” (Newman & Clarke, 2009, p. 62). Unforeseen collaboration sometimes emerged from the ashes of animosity. Interviewees repeatedly placed emphasis on *“mindsets”*, *“personalities”*, and *“relationships”*. Yet, institutional reforms typically concerned *“structures”*. From strategic to local forums, participatory arrangements were constantly reformed.

Structures, unlike *“personalities”* or *“culture”*, can be designed and reassembled. They offer a visible target when compared to the milieu of mindsets and interaction patterns that make up the practical ecology of participation. Of course, structures do shape processes, but it is through processes that forum participants render structures meaningful. Therefore, participatory assemblages represent cultural crucibles—understanding culture as “a set of material practices that constitute the meanings, values, and identities of a social order” (Fischer, 2000, p. 120). While making sense of the wanted/unwanted spectrum, I began to

understand PPPs not only as deliberative practitioners but also as culture change agents, and used this to learn about their institutional landscape.

### **The “culture change” project**

Often characterized as a “congested and confused policy space” (Durose & Lowndes, 2010, p. 342), the local crossroads of partnership and participation assembled through Community Planning Partnerships has been nurtured by successive Scottish governments “adding to but not wholly displacing pre-existing governing arrangements—thus creating further complexity” (Cowell, 2004, p. 497). As Lowndes (2005, p. 297) observes:

local authorities have been encouraged and then required, to change their arrangements for political leadership and decision-making. But they have for the most part insisted on driving the new vehicle down the old path—whatever the discomfort involved!

PPPs work at the vortices where that discomfort unfolds. These difficulties have been recurrent since Community Planning started in Scotland. Abram & Cowell (2004, p. 213) have noted ongoing “fundamental disputes” about its purpose and “the beliefs and power relations that could hold it together”. The dominance by the largest partners (i.e. Council and NHS), the ambiguous possibilities for the non-profit and community sectors, and the new roles for elected representatives, officials and citizens, made these governance partnerships spaces where “different operational cultures are held in suspension” (Abram & Cowell, 2004, p. 216). Although such spaces can open roles and relationships to renegotiation, they also present considerable challenges:

existing arrangements of local governance . . . . are deeply embedded through informal norms and conventions. When reformers attempt to introduce new institutional frameworks . . . . they are faced with the equally important, but rarely recognised, task of de-institutionalising old ways of working. . . . Those who benefit from existing arrangements are likely to defend the status quo; when formal change becomes inevitable, they may seek to incorporate old ways of working into new partnership structures. (Sullivan & Lowndes, 2004, p. 67)

### *What culture? What change?*

PPPs often talked about “*the political culture*”, and argued that “*a lot of people in public service are very cynical, they don’t really believe that Community Planning and engagement can work or is worth the effort, specially when it affects their patch*”. In contrast, other officials had a more optimistic outlook: “*you need to change your processes and procedures and the culture gradually spreads*”.

In this context, “*culture*” represents an empty signifier capable of encapsulating diverse concerns and aspirations. Understanding the wanted/unwanted quality of PPPs’ work offers insight into the institutional culture that enfolds, and evolves with, participatory forums. Here, institutions are not the same as organizations, but “stable, valued and recurring patterns of behaviour” that constitute “the rules of the game” (Huntington, 1968). Informal rules can be as influential “as official codes of conduct and written constitutions in determining opportunities and constraints for participation” (Lowndes, Pratchett & Stoker, 2006, p. 546). Ostrom (1999, pp. 37-38) argued that the most powerful institutions are “invisible”, and coined the concept “rules-in-use” to understand them. Following Lowndes et al. (2006, p.

542), rules-in-use here refer to the combination of “formal and informal institutions that influences participation in a locality, through shaping the behaviour of politicians, public managers, community leaders and citizens themselves”.

PPPs described their “*culture change*” role as “*reshaping ways of working*”—that is, reshaping institutional rules-in-use. In this, they were supported by those, like Councillor Wilson, who criticised “*the old days when the politicians and the officers knew best*”, and insisted that “*you’ve got to throw old protocols out of the window*”. The next sections explore those two key domains in the policy world of official PPPs—i.e. their relationships with fellow officials and politicians. This addresses an important gap. Research often pays attention to “citizens, users, and publics who are to be engaged, coerced, empowered and made responsible through participatory initiatives” but often overlooks how “public officials negotiate their roles and identities” (Barnes, 2009, p. 34). In other words, whereas much research focuses on what participatory arrangements do to citizens, here I focus on what they do to institutions that host them.

### **Official PPPs and public servants: Changing public sector governance**

For the past two decades the UK public sector has undergone various “modernisation” agendas often framed as management improvements (Clarke & Newman, 1997). In parallel, particularly since the 1997 New Labour UK government and the first devolved Scottish government in 1999, partnership and participation have become prominent (Mayo et al., 2007; Orr & McAteer, 2004). To be sure, the emphasis on efficiency and performance remains, but “overlaid on it” are “new demands that public services should empower citizens and communities, develop partnerships, collaborate with ‘civil society’ groups, and foster ‘co-production’ arrangements with service users” (Newman & Clarke, 2009, p. 6). In this

context, PPPs find themselves—as one explained—“*trying to encourage and cajole staff to be able to engage well with the public*”. Public sector officials faced by new roles and dilemmas (Goss, 2001) sometimes “refuse to ‘know their place’” in these new arrangements (Newman & Clarke, 2009, p. 60), which means that the “joining-up” can be “strongly resisted” (Newman, 2012, Location 3215). Official PPPs interpreted that “*resistance*” in terms of “*control*” and “*expertise*”.

A PPP argued that some public servants fear deliberative forums because they “*worry that if we evidence too much need things will have to change, so there is that tension that they’d lose control*”. Another argued that the Partnership Board is used by key actors for “*rubberstamping*” decisions made offstage, rather than as a frontstage for inclusive policy-making. A non-profit sector representative explained: “*it’s not in their interest to make it diverse because that dilutes their power and their ability to make decisions, certain decisions are always made outside of the room, in secret, in the areas with largest budgets*”. This referred to Council and National Health Service senior officials. When I interviewed them, it seemed apparent that these were accepted rules-in-use —e.g. NHS executive: “*it’s the same for any decision-making process, consensus-building goes on outside the meeting and . . . it’s really important that it is aired at the meeting but you would obviously want to talk to people before*”. In this way, the inner workings at the Partnership’s strategic level were often negotiated offstage, beyond the backstages and frontstages where PPPs have room for maneuver.

Consequently, much of the PPPs’ work entailed a politics of exposure: trying to “*drag*” actors and issues into more visible spaces with the hope of eliciting deliberative discipline and the sharing of policy-making jurisdiction. This materialized in myriad ongoing backstage negotiations.

Fischer (2000, p. 259) argues that certain governance discourses have given way to an “increasingly technocratic form of public decision making”. Renegotiating the existing politics of expertise constitutes a key dimension in public engagement practice. Claiming expertise is a way of asserting professional jurisdiction over a social domain (Abbott, 1988). In representative democracy, politicians and expert officials have traditionally claimed jurisdiction over policy-making. PPPs’ allies often noted that opening participation processes depended on officials “*not feeling threatened*” by new configurations of knowledge/power (Foucault, 1980), and emphasized the difficulty of changing rules-in-use –e.g. NHS official: “*I sit around some of my colleagues . . . and I find myself in that position as well going: it’s easier just to do it ourselves, we know best*”.

Consequently, the allocation of roles implicit in how PPPs script (see Escobar 2014) and facilitate participatory processes is sometimes unwelcomed by officials who see them as encroaching on their expertise and domain. This seems typical in transitions from technocratic to participatory policy-making (Fischer, 2000). Officials are being asked to relinquish power afforded by their authority and expertise, and develop new kinds of contact with citizens and stakeholders. Engagement work pushes new forms of evidence and knowledge (local, experiential) into decision-making processes. As noted earlier, some PPPs believe that, insofar these officials are “*around the table*”, they can “*make converts*” by exposing them to various others (ideas, people) and entangle them into collaboration. In this process, previously unquestioned technocratic expertise may be exposed to new deliberative scrutiny.

### **Official PPPs and politicians: The interplay of democratic practices**



PPPs and politicians sometimes need each other, but their relationship embodies the very frictions between the distinct practices of democracy that they embody and enact. Although these frictions have been noted previously in Scotland (e.g. Orr & McAteer, 2004; Sinclair, 2008), we still know little about how they are negotiated. This section, therefore, addresses the role of politicians, their relationship with PPPs, and the impact of electoral dynamics on participatory processes.

Participatory and deliberative democracy can be seen as “supplementary to electoral democracy, shoring up its functional weaknesses” to generate legitimacy locally, “issue by issue, policy by policy, and constituency by constituency” (Warren, 2009, p. 8). Participatory arrangements are often ambiguously appended to representative mechanisms, and elected representatives may struggle to “develop different, more interactive ways of governing with, rather than on behalf of, the public” (Sullivan, 2009, p. 52).

While shadowing PPPs, I met elected enthusiasts of participation who saw themselves as “*a new breed of politician*” whose job is “*to put into action what local communities want to achieve*”. Others had a more critical stand: “*we’ll listen to what people say, but they don’t know anything about the budgets, they don’t know the issues in other areas, they’re not in a position to make a judgment*”. Many feared “*ignorant*” and self-serving publics, saw public forums as secondary and only made appearances when nudged by PPPs. These varied attitudes cut across, and within, party-political divides, and support for public participation depended on individual “*political champions*”. Councillor Wilson, the proverbial “*facilitative leader*” celebrated in the literature (Bussu & Bartels, 2013), describes his Cabinet struggles:

*Some politicians find it difficult to let go, some politicians don’t trust local people, and there was lots of debate about how we could do it, how we could fund it. . . . So a lot of my time was spent persuading my colleagues.*

This was problematic for PPPs as new forums were initially dominated by traditional party politics. A councillor illustrated this:

*local councillors were dominating . . . . and local people are thinking: we are wasting our time, if that lot are just gonna be talking amongst themselves and deciding. And [official PPPs] through me and through their own persuaded other councillors . . . . to [take] a step back . . . . not just carrying on as if they are running the show.*

PPPs were instrumental in renegotiating the role of elected representatives. Initially, it was a matter of preventing forums from becoming party-political “*stumping grounds*” or “*shouting matches*”. Once certain councillors relaxed the premise “*I’ve got to stamp my authority on this place*”, they focused more on policy deliberation. Nonetheless, some councillors regarded public participation—a Cabinet officer explained—as a way of “*abdicating their responsibility to make decisions*”. Interestingly, as PPPs noted, the diffusion of responsibility also entails a diffusion of “*credit*”. When public forums achieved outcomes (e.g. capital investment, new services), ruling councillors had to share credit with other participants and politicians. Accordingly, some councillors kept distance from the forums—they questioned their purpose or struggled to find ways of doing, and speaking about, participatory politics.

Building relationships with elected representatives is critical for official PPPs. Although sometimes they struck cross-party alliances, they worked most closely with Cabinet members who were instrumental to the forums’ influence on decision-making. PPPs often spoke about the “*double-edged sword of working with councilors*”: “*we’re pulled off in all sorts of directions, but on the flipside, we also have their ear*”. Indeed, this was not a unidirectional relationship—“*we use them and they use us*”, explained a PPP. In that trade, PPPs risked losing relational capital (“*trust*”, “*face*”, “*reputation*”), as councillors could use participatory

processes to advance electoral agendas (e.g. being seeing to channel resources to their ward).

In turn, PPPs used elected representatives for strategic purposes:

*there is the legitimacy stuff. . . . We write all the briefing stuff that they stand up and say at the beginning [of public forums], we frame everything to fit the way we want it to be, we use them to get access to information, to get things onto an agenda, we use them when other departments are not playing ball.*

Often, after public forums, PPPs and ally councillors would find a quiet corridor to “plot” moves—e.g. how to reframe forum issues to tap into existing budgets, how to mobilize departmental resources to service a forum, or how to bring in officials who weren’t “playing ball”. Accordingly, PPPs did considerable backstage work to get support—or at least acquiescence—from councillors. One PPP found this “*kind of entertaining, it’s what makes it interesting, and it’s about working up people and playing people, and working out who I can work with and who I can ignore*”. PPPs typically devised three roles for the councillors: completely engaged, engaged at some stage, or kept “*at arms-length*”. The three entail risks and opportunities that PPPs must calibrate. For instance, having Cabinet councillors completely engaged can “*give clout*” to a participatory process—a clear link to the Administration and departmental resources. The downside is that when those councillors lose elections, entire processes can be in jeopardy.

In the wake of the 2012 local government elections in Scotland, a PPP explained: “*election time is just exhausting, the amount of councillors I’ve spoken to in the last 2 weeks is unbelievable, they just want to see if some things can get done*”. It was not unusual that ruling councillors would announce large budgets for some participatory forums just before an election. The opposition leader was furious: “*things are being manufactured at this late stage . . . . to manipulate the electorate*”. Recurrent stories amongst Wyndland’s official PPPs

concerned the impact of the 2007 elections on previous public forums. The new Administration shut them down and opened new ones elsewhere. *“They just abolished them, the community was shattered”*, said the then opposition leader. In contrast, a Cabinet councillor argued that *“what the opposition mean by that is that we took the ability for them to control a budget away”*, and criticized them for seizing participatory forums *“as an opportunity to gain some of the power”* that they had lost electorally.

A new change of Administration in May 2012 turned the world of Wyndland’s PPPs upside down. It was particularly difficult for those who experienced the 2007 *“fiascos”*. Tears, uncertainty and frantic office days ensued. Suddenly, meticulously “scripted” processes (see Escobar, 2015), carefully facilitated forums, and painstakingly built relational capital were in jeopardy. Some officials ignored phone calls, and PPPs no longer had full access to the forums’ backstages that had been their turf. After a week, they received provisional answers from the new Administration: some forums were suspended, others could continue but without commitments. This infuriated the PPPs: *“they are asking us to waste our time in a process that may go nowhere”*; *“this forum is now a complete farce”*. Unable to script, without backstage leeway, frontstage performances risked becoming farces (Escobar, 2015).

PPPs agonized: *“we have involved officials from the outset, the Leader of the Council, the councillors, we had the political support of both sides, everything to make sure that we were not putting ourselves in this position”*. And they kept trying to anticipate what may be next—as this office conversation illustrates:

*PPP 1: Maybe they will actually respect the practice and the community engagement that went into it . . . . [and] that these processes are quite robust. This shows you how vulnerable these things are.*

*PPP 2: [The new Administration] will likely . . . pull out of the areas where we are working now, and take it back to where it was initially. I was working there, it was all closed down so badly, so I don't have credibility there . . . I might as well just quit.*

*Trainee PPP: So many people have worked so hard for years, brought so many groups together, got people passionate and now . . . that meeting is cancelled, this meeting is cancelled, no idea what's going on here.*

*PPP 2: In this job, you work closer to policy and politicians that you would do in a traditional CDO [Community Development Officer] position.*

*CDO: Your job sucks [everyone laughs].*

Indeed, participatory processes that had engaged hundreds of citizens and stakeholders, but were connected to outgoing councillors, became “*under review*”. As the outgoing Cabinet had stopped forums in 2007, PPPs expected a repeat of this retaliatory approach. Arguably, Wyndland offers a prime exemplar of the vicious circle in which partisan and electoral dynamics trump participatory politics and deliberative processes.

To salvage some forums, official PPPs tried to regain leeway in the (new) backstage. Firstly, they investigated who would lead their department—“*we used to have a champion in Cabinet, we need someone like that*”. Then, they convened forums that still had “*momentum*” and where participants could question new ruling councillors about intentions and budgets. Indeed, citizens and new opposition councillors kept pressing on. PPPs often spoke tactically at the forums—e.g. “*hearing [new councillors] saying that this is going ahead is heartening for everyone here*”. Limited in backstage room for maneuver, PPPs made the most of the frontstage—using it to influence inaccessible backstage domains. The “*frustration*” of not

being privy to spaces where things were being worked out eventually turned into a renewed sense of possibility.

They began to mobilize relational capital and strike new alliances—sometimes unexpectedly. Like the evening when a new Cabinet councillor confided bitter disagreements within his party: *“I’ve been taking drugs to cope with this shit since the election. . . . I shouldn’t probably say this, but fuck it!”*. The official PPP replied: *“with time you’ll know me and you’ll find that I’m a very discreet person”*. One forum was in this councillor’s town, and he assured the PPP that *“this will fucking happen, or they will be in for a rough ride”*. He insisted that *“the town comes before the party”* and that he will become independent if necessary. This was unexpected insight for the PPP: *“I shouldn’t be hearing this, I’m a Council officer”*. The Councillor laughed: *“that’s what your manager always says”*. Such sensitive information was extremely valuable, as PPPs built new foundations for their work. Potential new allies emerged; new windows of opportunity opened. The PPPs’ political nose tracked new trails, carving up a new backstage from where to try and salvage previous forums. For example, in participation processes at risk of becoming *“farces”*, they casted senior public servants giving public assurance, so that they would have a face-saving interest in negotiating backstage with the new Administration.

As for how to shield participatory processes from electoral politics, the PPPs experience suggests some options: keeping forums away from councilors—but risk losing influence and legitimacy; forging cross-party alliances—a considerable challenge; or keeping forum lifecycles within the legislature’s timeline—which requires impeccable scripting. When I concluded fieldwork in September 2013 some forums were still ongoing, albeit delayed and pending Cabinet decisions. In Wyndland, deliberative democracy remains subservient to electoral competition and representative institutions.

## **Burning out: PPPs and internal activism**

The official “*job description*” of the PPPs studied here was to engage citizens and stakeholders in deliberative forums; but didn’t mention anything about fostering “*culture change*”. This explains the bewilderment some PPPs felt about the political nature of their role. A basic distinction helped me to interpret their diverse approaches to engagement work—namely, that between the administrative and the activist PPP.

The former adopts a fairly bureaucratic role, working within parameters set by others, while the latter carries out political work to reshape policy worlds. The administrative PPP accepts existing cultures, whereas the activist becomes a culture change agent. The former adapts to existing rules-in-use, whereas the latter seeks to foster new ones. While the administrative PPP closes the office for the day, the activist strikes a tactical conversation in the car park. To be sure, I am not describing specific PPPs, but two ways of being a PPP. Indeed, the ones I met fluctuated between these ideal types depending on various dimensions—including the nature of the participatory process at hand, their experiences and feelings about the job, and their broader web of interactions. In some cases, time and challenges forged the activist PPP, yet in others, they made way for more administrative approaches.

### *Internal activism*

I have illustrated the PPPs internal activism through their backstage struggles to develop participatory processes. That activism doesn’t focus necessarily on substantial issues, but on the form that policy processes take to deal with them (i.e. participatory and/or deliberative). Thinking about official PPPs as internal activists challenges the “stereotypical distinctions

between activist outsides and incorporated insides” (Newman, 2012, p. Loc 4551). It seems “too simplistic to associate subversion solely with action outside the official sphere of participation” (Barnes & Prior, 2009, p. 10). As Goss (2001, p. 5) argues:

working in the space between bureaucratic, market and network cultures, creates space for innovation. . . . The constant collision of different assumptions and traditions offers scope to challenge on all sides. The very messiness begins to break down old systems and procedures. . . . New [entrepreneurial] skills and capabilities are needed.

Official PPPs can be understood as institutional entrepreneurs (DiMaggio, 1988), policy entrepreneurs (Roberts & King, 1991) or “civic entrepreneurs” (Durose, 2011). As activist insiders, PPPs can deploy relational capital and micro-political know-how seeking “to balance multiple competing constituencies” and “induce co-operation” thus “forging new coalitions” (Freeman & Peck, 2007, p. 925). A PPP argued that taking an internal activist approach “*depends on your personal politics*”: “*some are quite happy to let things take their own course*”, but “*this is far too important*” to let it become an “*administrative task*” with no scope for “*reshaping governance*”. PPPs often spoke about “*putting my bit in for the world*”, “*values of justice and equality*”, and “*people’s rights to participate in decision-making*”. This materialized not only through forums, but also backstage work trying to redress power imbalances—i.e. supporting “*community action forcing the Council to come around*”, or contesting “*anti-non-profit-sector*” attitudes that hindered inclusion in policy making. Their motivation stemmed from previous experience in social movements, community work or non-profit organizations, and understanding “*their struggles*”. However, this insider activism: “*can feel very uncomfortable because we are [government] employees*”.



In addition, the official PPPs studied here could seldom rely on formal power as they operated from the bottom of their organizational hierarchies. This can be challenging: *“I can’t call a Head of Service into account”; “I don’t have power over any area, so the negotiation depends on interpersonal relations”*. Nonetheless, one PPP argued that *“maybe this is an advantage, I am not a senior manager, so I can raise questions and do things that others can’t”, “I do have the power to bring things to the table”*. Perhaps their lack of formal power has honed the micro-political know-how illustrated earlier. The capacity to work the backstage, build relational capital, and assemble processes thus becomes crucial for “spotting opportunities to pursue forum objectives that were unlikely to be achieved through official channels” (Barnes, 2009, p. 45).

This takes exhausting subtlety: *“acknowledging sensitivities and being very careful that you don’t upset certain people . . . . takes a lot of energy”*. It requires patience: *“sometimes spend months thinking about tactics to get around certain person or group”*. It needs perseverance: *“I work and work and tweak my way until finally I get what I need”*. It also entails political knowledge to *“play on existing interests”*, and find the right time for *“rattling cages at the Council”* or *“rocking the boat with our colleagues”*. Finally, it also involves *“twisting peoples’ arms”* when PPPs feel *“forced to go around pushing people to work in certain ways”*. Despite mixed feelings about the thornier side of this *“culture change”* work, official PPPs relished the “pleasures of agency” (Newman, 2012, p. Loc 231). One explained: *“I like finding the way through the maze, I enjoy the conflict bits, the bits that are frustrating and how you’ve got to sort of manage through people”*.

#### *Emotion work and burnout*

Previous sections illustrate the intensity of these official PPPs' world—an undercurrent of passion and frustration that springs into myriad actions, trials and tribulations. Official PPPs noted that, in their job, the track from elation to despair is a one-stop journey. They often savored the relational milieu: *“there is a lot of shit in this job, but there is a lot of good people”*. Occasionally, they relished the ecstasy of the forum aftermath. For instance, after large events culminating months of preparation, the atmosphere was so electrifying that team members couldn't sleep. Even deskwork time was often intense—while writing emails or policy documents, body language revealed mounting tension punctuated by sudden outbursts of *“frustration”* or laughter. At times of turmoil—e.g. post-elections—the texture of their emotional palette would thicken, turning frustration into despair and stories into tears. This unfolded in the backstage of their backstage—the toilet, the car. The frontstage remained the domain of emotional labor:

*PPP 1: You are always performing in this job.*

*PPP 2: Yes, the other day my face was hurting from smiling so much . . . .  
keeping this level of enthusiasm and cheeriness is quite exhausting.*

I witnessed the *“burnout”* of official PPPs over time: *“I just don't know if I can carry on for much longer”*. They felt *“overwhelmed and overstretched”*, and *“scarred”* by experiences. There was much self-questioning: *“I'm going through a period in which I think my work is shit and doesn't mean anything”*. This *“burnout”* was not lost to other officials, who answered quite dramatically when asked if they would take the PPPs job:

*Council official: I don't envy her, I think she's got possibly one of the worst jobs in the Council, and she's made a lot of enemies.*

*Non-profit sector representative: She is between a rock and a hard place, she sees injustice, people who stop things from happening and this is the deal about power play within a Local Authority.*

*National Health Service official: I could not physically do it.*

*Council service manager: I would commit suicide within six months.*

Such strong expressions underline the intensity of official public participation work. PPPs shared stories of predecessors who, after forums collapsed, took “*stress leave*” and never returned. A PPP said that “*it gets easier as you get a bit of life under your belt*”. But time kindled its own dilemmas: “*I know where all the bodies are buried*”. Intense political work was taxing, although PPPs were sometimes humorous about it. In this conversation, an elected representative explained difficulties recruiting political candidates:

*Councillor: Why would they want a job in which they’ll have to work endless hours, for a modest salary and being attacked from all quarters?*

*PPP [laughing]: Just like Community Planning Officers.*

Over time, the fire of some activist PPPs would steadily dim. The prospect of “*unfair*” forum closures would eventually become a resigned affair: “*do I want to fight to the bitter end, to go down all guns blazing? I don’t know, because it’s not worth it*”. In such cases, the frustrations, dilemmas and struggles of the activist PPP could become catalysts for more administrative approaches. Engagement work can wear you down. Ups and downs can be unsettling even for those who enjoy “*finding the way through the maze*”. The pressures of being wanted and unwanted can steadily add fuel to the “*burnout*”. Arguably, Wyndland’s ecology of participation provided a more hospitable environment for the administrative PPP, and somewhat nudged the activist PPP to weigh the pressures and pleasures of agency.

## Professionalising official public participation in Scotland

Having offered an account of the backstage political work of official PPPs, the remainder of this chapter considers the professionalization and institutionalisation of public engagement work more broadly.

In the sociology of work, professions are “exclusive occupational groups applying somewhat abstract knowledge to particular cases” and claiming to “control” certain “knowledge and skill” (Abbott, 1988, p. 8). The hold a profession establishes over certain tasks is known as “jurisdiction”, which is maintained, extended and refined according to a “knowledge system” capable of redefining “problems and tasks, defend them from interlopers, and seize new problems” (p. 10). In sum, a jurisdictional claim is a “claim for the legitimate control of a particular kind of work” (p. 60).

In Scotland, official PPPs seem nowhere near that level of professionalization. The PPPs studied here didn’t claim to have the monopoly over engagement work, and actually trained others (e.g. officials, community representatives) in organising participation. Nonetheless, I did observe attempts at developing a sense of professional jurisdiction. Their conversations often examined what it means to be “*professional*” in this field, the tools deemed suitable, and who does or doesn’t perform “*proper engagement*”. They also questioned the ability of others to assemble “*legitimate*” publics and provide “*impartial*” mediation amongst competing interests. And they remarked that “*participation is not done properly*” and “*the field needs professionalising*”.

PPPs understood their job as a political endeavour although, as other policy workers (Colebatch, 2009), they faced demands to represent the political as technical, and distort the

mess of practice into ordered expert categories. Accordingly, they presented themselves as expert mediators between official and public spheres, foregrounding their process expertise i.e.: knowing how to assemble and perform publics, script participatory processes, facilitate deliberation, and translate myriad utterances into usable inscriptions (Escobar, 2014). However, their professional jurisdiction is contested as other actors stake claims on participatory practices. In Scotland, official PPPs arrive at domains with established engagement rituals (e.g. via councillors or community councillors) and, as seen in this chapter, struggle to develop new participatory spaces and deliberative dynamics. Consolidating professional jurisdiction will thus depend on their capacity to accomplish political work (e.g. “*culture change*”) that enables them to incorporate, substitute, reshape or displace existing practices.

Furthermore, they face challenges regarding their emerging professional status and identity within local government in Scotland (see Scott, 2012). For instance, as network-oriented agents, they often struggle to operate in hierarchical contexts—i.e. they lack power to summon senior officials, yet their job is to entangle them in participatory processes. They also sit uneasily within existing departmental structures because they don’t belong to traditional policy silos (e.g. housing, education, etc), but to the crosscutting realm of process. They are, therefore, a new type of policy worker in an evolving institutional landscape, and their professional status and identity are under development. Nevertheless, the official PPPs studied here (Community Planning Officers) are building informal networks across neighbouring local authorities, and via platforms and events organised by the Scottish Government<sup>4</sup>. Assessing to what extent engagement work is becoming a professionalized field within public administration in Scotland is thus a task for future research.

## **Dilemmas of institutionalizing public participation work**

Policy makers deciding on building capacity for public participation face important choices. Some scholars argue that public authorities should become enablers of participatory and deliberative democracy (e.g. Sirianni, 2009). In that light, the choice is between building in-house capacity or buying services in the market. Cooper & Smith (2012, p. 22) note the distress of external participation consultants hired ad hoc by public authorities. They complain about lack of impact, a failure by officials to “understand the demands of participation”, and “impediments caused by the broader structure and culture of public authorities”. Wyndland’s official PPPs share similar frustrations, but they can do something about it precisely because they are insiders.

Of course, institutionalizing engagement expertise can also foster tokenism and the proliferation of administrative approaches to the job. However, buying expertise externally establishes participation as an add-on, thus turning participatory practices into market commodities that can be sold as technical rather than political processes (e.g. Lee, 2015). Building in-house capacity brings new policy workers who, as I have shown, might seek to dislocate rules-in-use. External consultants, in contrast, face the challenge of working without trumping their commercial bottom-line (Cooper & Smith, 2012, p. 29; Hendriks & Carson, 2008), and they are powerless after reporting the results of a process. In contrast, official PPPs enjoy public sector security, and can invest time building internal and external alliances. Kadlec & Friedman (2007) argue that forums must be followed by an activist phase in which PPPs try to make the process count. In Wyndland, that activism is not for the aftermath, but structured into the everyday work of the official PPP.

A new body of expertise is “a way of recognizing problems as well as a way of addressing them” (Colebatch, 2009, p. 32). If PPPs are the solution, what is the problem? If the point is to improve market research on policy products, then ad hoc external consultancy, or official administrative PPPs, may seem suitable. If the problem is, however, developing participatory practices that change governing culture, then official activist PPPs may be the way. Anyhow, partnership and participation remain empty signifiers rendered meaningful by their political ecology. Engagement is thus a contested domain of practice where agency, and its location, matters. This emphasizes the value of researching what participatory practices do to the institutions that host them.

In this light, the critique that official spaces for participation are prone to co-option can be countered with the argument that, precisely because of their official nature, they may enable clear links to formal decision-making and foster culture change. Of course, this depends on summoning participants who may question official agendas and engage in critical deliberation, as well as on having PPPs capable of scripting processes where that may happen. There are also questions about whether PPPs, being officials, can actually act as mediators between official and public spheres. In my experience, this depends greatly on their personal politics and loyalties, their approach to the job, and their evolving ecology of participation. All in all, given the criticism that participatory processes often lack connection to institutional decision-making, arguably, official PPPs accountable to elected bodies make lines of accountability and legitimacy clear and operational.

## **Conclusions**

I have presented participatory and deliberative democracy in Scotland as a contested, fragile, and evolving assemblage that takes constant work. And I have sought to render the everyday

political work of official PPPs visible. Accordingly, I illustrated that there is scope for maneuver—by officials, politicians, and citizens—when it comes to shaping a given ecology of participation. As Lowndes et al. (2006, p. 559) argue, institutions are malleable: there is “a degree of path dependence but actors can shape and bend institutional forces in new directions”. Of course, that entails painstaking struggle to reshape rules-in-use as illustrated earlier, and the potential burnout of PPPs should not be underestimated. This also highlights how official PPPs can influence local participatory democracy, and warrants further research into the consequences of administrative vs. activist approaches to public engagement work.

Studying the wanted/unwanted tension illustrated how various actors may react to participatory governance policy (i.e. Community Planning in Scotland) embodied and enacted by new cadres of official PPPs. The emerging picture features the perennial tensions between tradition and change. New participatory practices can unsettle established ways of working amongst public sector officials, politicians, and community representatives. Some may see their traditional roles challenged by the new participatory gospel, backed by national policies, and enacted locally by official PPPs. In this light, official PPPs appear as political workers advancing a culture change project ripe with tensions, ambiguities and power struggles: a project both embraced and despised by people across the spectrum of official and public spheres. In that sense, the official PPPs’ work forces negotiation amongst the diverse understandings of local democracy and public service that collide and coalesce in new participatory processes.

As Sullivan (2009, p. 65) argues, participatory governance policies “are themselves subversive acts, designed with the express purpose of unsettling the established relationships of politicians, the public and professionals in the pursuit of new ones”. Consequently, Community Planning in Scotland can be seen as a disruptive intervention that problematizes



local policy worlds. An intervention where official PPPs' practices shape, and are shaped by, an evolving ecology of participation. This, in turn, forges the activist PPP, or fosters more administrative approaches by virtue of puzzlement, disappointment or exhaustion. The chapter highlights the risk of burnout faced by PPPs working for public authorities, and how it may be detrimental to a vibrant democracy if administrative approaches to public engagement work prevail over more 'subversive' internal activism.

Consequently, deliberative scholarship must pay attention to the backstage work of PPPs, which sustains the frontstage of public forums (see Escobar, 2015). The chapter has offered examples of how participatory and deliberative democracy can be jeopardized by electoral and partisan dynamics, and subservient to representative and bureaucratic institutions. In regions like Wyndland, the prospects for developing a coherent "deliberative system" (Parkinson & Mansbridge, 2013) can depend greatly on the political know-how, engagement skills and personal commitment of people like the official PPPs shadowed here. Yet, as noted earlier, the institutionalization and professionalization of this field in Scotland is ambiguous and fragile, which can arguably hinder its development, thus placing this new cadre of officials in contexts where burnout is likely and support precarious—particularly in the current context of public spending cuts.

This chapter shows clearly that official PPPs do more than designing and facilitating public participation processes. They are unstated political workers and culture change agents negotiating the cutting edge of evolving democratic practice. This has implications for decisions about employing in-house PPPs or outsourcing to consultants. It is not simply a matter of "what works best", but what works when, for whom and to what purpose. Those who see public participation as part of the management toolbox of contemporary governance may favor buying expertise from the public engagement industry. In contrast, those who see

participation as the driving force of a vibrant democracy may favor building engagement capacity into the everyday work of public administrations. What the Scottish example illustrates is that institutionalizing participation work can send powerful ripples across official and public spheres, at least when activist approaches are at play. There is much to learn about official PPPs across the world, particularly those carving up space for democratic innovation that may bridge elitist institutions and participatory practices.

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## Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> Excluding time travelling or working on fieldnotes afterwards.

<sup>2</sup> This has been corroborated in subsequent workshops where I presented research findings. This 'members-checking' stage in the research cycle helps to refine findings, gauge plausibility, and continue the grounded theorizing process (Schwartz-Shea and Yanow, 2009).

<sup>3</sup> Survey currently underway at What Works Scotland <http://whatworksscotland.ac.uk>.

<sup>4</sup> See <http://www.gov.scot/Publications/2015/06/5337>